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Kent State after Twenty-Five Years

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FIFTY YEARS AGO LAST SPRING MUCH OF THE WORLD WAS WAITING FOR THE LIBeration of the Nazi death camps. I was not. I was too young and naive to understand much about the holocaust. In that spring I waited for the liberation of one man, my father. The war that had removed so many from loved ones permanently had removed him from our family for three years. How well I remember his homecoming. He stepped off the train onto the station platform in Tiffin, Ohio. My mother cried, "There he is!" I said, "No, he is taller than that." It was true. He had been taller when he left. But I was the one who had grown.

I. NO TIME FOR NOSTALGIA

Twenty-five years ago last spring I was waiting for the cessation of the terrible turmoil that had gripped the college campuses of this country. It was not a wait soon to be over. The turmoil would get worse before it got better. I waited that year at Michigan State University in East Lansing, Michigan. I was Pastor at University Lutheran Church. The people I loved who were in jeopardy then were students and townspeople. The tension was terrific, a daily trial. It was like holding the lid on an explosion. On a memorable May evening, I was standing on the corner of Division Street and Grand River Avenue with the president of the

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congregation. We watched with apprehension and dread the numerous student-set fires and whole platoons of Michigan State Police marching in formation. If I never see such a thing again, it will be too soon. The President had ordered the invasion of Cambodia. The explosion could no longer be contained. Although many shared our apprehension that night, no one would have guessed that the lid would come off at a small college called Kent in northern Ohio.

I have colleagues who want those times back. I have taught students who felt deprived because they were not in Kent for the explosion. I am not a member of either group. But I do understand why they feel as they do. College students were alive then, eager, motivated with a cause. Or two causes. Or four or five causes! The difference between then and now is the difference between holding the lid on an explosion and kindling a fire under people. To have been present during the incident would be to know intimately what all the uproar was about. But I also know students who were at Michigan State and at Kent State and who were never able to get a perspective on the event, alienated by it from life itself. I also remember too well the smoldering and palpable animosity of the times, the animosity and resentment between those under thirty and those above thirty. I was in the latter category, but not by much. Yet the gap between me and the students then was infinitely greater than that between me and the students I now serve. And I am 25 years older.

Two years later, in the spring of 1972, I was surprised when the regional director for campus ministry invited me to interview for the newly created position of campus pastor for the Lutheran community at Kent State. I said to Jerry Miller, "I'm a fairly conservative fellow, Jerry." He said, "It is a fairly conservative place." It came as news to me. But he was right.

During my first couple of years here, there were still students who had been here "then." Many were still angry, still maintaining the struggle. Now the cries had the added anguish of "doing something" about "Kent State." Somewhere about the beginning of May the administration would urge us to don our collars and stand on the street corners of downtown Kent. The myth was that by our presence we would curtail violence. I was never convinced and always felt somewhat foolish, for I *was* convinced that everybody knew that everybody knew. The gap had not yet been bridged. But I reckoned that once again, I had grown.

I have grown since then, certainly older, perhaps wiser. I know that the gap I experienced was created not only by the righteous anger of youth coupled with adolescent rebellion gone to seed, but also by some of my own fears, my own appropriation of St. Paul's concern that "everything should be done decently and in order." I remember saying to Jerry Miller that if it were a choice between totalitarianism and anarchy, I would take totalitarianism because at least then the enemy would be identifiable. It is probably the Lutheran, not necessarily Christian, position.

Why do the nations rage? Why do nations rage against one another, and why do nations rage internally? We all know the general, if unpopular answer to that. It is in us, young and old, to rage, preferably against something or someone outside

of ourselves, perhaps especially if it is not in us to deal with our own guilt and complicity. I understand now better than ever Jesus' prediction of "wars and rumors of war." He is not calling wars into being or thanking the Heavenly Father for violence and carnage, he is dealing with the reality of human existence. Violence, particularly justifiable violence, is in us. I write this in the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing. Can anyone imagine an animal other than *homo sapiens* doing such a thing? We do the creation a terrible injustice when we call one another by animal names. Pogo's immortal dictum applies, "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

II. No Time for Denial

So, Kent State. Naive students, unwilling to come to grips with the fact that they might well be the threat they would like to believe they are; National Guard troops, not state policemen trained for the job, troops recently returned from a grueling strike-related event; troops sent out by a governor who loved to call them out for a hangnail, a governor who was never even able to say something as insipid as "I am sorry that day ever came"; a President prosecuting a war as unpopular, ill-defined, and unsupported as the one in which my father fought was "popular"; a lovely, early May day toward the end of the spring quarter with the rites of spring attendant to those days in any college community; a jittery town, likely to have supported any extreme action that might have ended the chaos—all those things came together to create the atmosphere that one commentator suggested was the instrument that pulled the trigger at around lunch time that afternoon.

The atmosphere included those over thirty condemning the private morality of those under thirty and those under thirty condemning the public morality of those over thirty. Both groups were correct. Neither could or would hear the other. The young people were idealistic, mirrors of the society, which is one reason why the society was so infuriated by them. They believed the idealistic rhetoric of their parents and elders. The atmosphere also included those who were guilty because they were fighting in and supporting an insupportable war and those who were guilty because they were not fighting in and supporting a war they had been told they ought to support. It was an atmosphere of ambiguity, defensiveness, and mistrust. It was a human atmosphere.

Those 61 to 67 gun shots seared themselves into our psyche every bit as much as did the recent bombing at Oklahoma City. "Four dead in Ohio!" Students were shocked and enraged, and stayed from further violence and mayhem only by mentors and faculty who cared for them more than they cared for their own lives. Townspeople, who saw a threat to their whole way of life, screamed to use the incident as a cause to shoot more. The college president, out of town at the time of the incident, a good man, was vilified. At his funeral years later, the then president suggested that he understood the burden the deceased had borne because he had shared the office and been on the receiving end of some negative criticism himself. I had come to know former President White well. The biggest reason he was so

hunched over in the years before his death was that he carried the weight of that day on his shoulders. He did so alone. It would so shape any human being.

The effect of the tragedy on those who survived was and is still apparent. The chaplain with the National Guard that day was also a father. One of his daughters recently married my wife's nephew. We talked of May 4 at the reception. How well he remembered. His eyes teared. It had been 24 years!

For the tenth anniversary of the event, my predecessor in this congregation was asked to write an article. He tells what has become a familiar story. You can read the sequence of calculations and miscalculations in any account. The striking thing is not the story. The striking thing is that, even after ten years, his story reads like something that happened yesterday. For many who were here, emotions are still so raw that they will not forget though Alzheimer's destroy every other recollection.

When I would mention trying to do some healing work in the community and on the campus or that I was speaking on the May 4 event somewhere or another, the office secretary would always question why we could not just forget about it. The answer is obvious. We cannot forget because we cannot forget.

In the years since 1972 I have heard many words on the anniversaries of the event. Few have been memorable; none have been adequate. For my money, the grandest of the rituals associated with the anniversaries has been the candlelight walk each night of May 3. Students, faculty, staff, and townspeople join on the commons, light candles protected in paper and styrofoam cups, and walk slowly and silently around the campus, arriving finally at the site of the shootings where turns are taken silently standing at the spots where the four died. The point is the silence. No one says a thing. Participants are unusually responsible about preserving this aspect of the commemoration. There is a tacit recognition of the failure of speech.

But if never adequate to the occasion, there have been some good antepenultimate words. A phrase from one address continues to haunt me. Immediately following the event, folks did what folks do, they assessed blame. Not surprisingly, it was always somebody else's fault. On the occasion that I recall here, the speaker suggested that the determination of blame and of root cause are two different things. I grew as a result of that insight.

For many like our secretary, the issue is not historical accuracy, it is pain. They were wounded by those events. Her town, perhaps her world had come apart. Her method, used to some extent by the administration and to a greater extent by many dwellers in Kent, is that at which Americans seem to excel. It has been the first defense of all humans since Adam. We have honed it to a sharp edge. It is denial. I once thought it was merely stupid, but now I know better. I understand that immediately to let in the monstrous things with which reality assaults us would drive any person insane. But I also know that over the long haul, denial is destructive.

Nevertheless, it was the answer of choice in the days following May 4, 1970. A few years later, when a gymnasium was proposed on grounds close to the site,

the scab that had formed over the never-healed wound was scraped off. Many counted the resultant turmoil unfortunate. I thought it opportune and necessary. Some healing that was not permitted the first time around did take place in the revisiting.

May 4, 1970, was a watershed for our nation. The war that had been its impetus was over. It would be five more years until the helicopter evacuation of the American Embassy, but the war, and in particular our participation in that war, was over on May 4, 1970. The "nattering nabobs of negativity" had made a better point than Spiro Agnew, the originator of that phrase. Or at least, they had been the spokespersons for the discontent and dissatisfaction of a nation that knew it was in trouble but was afraid to admit it.

III. A Time for Renewal

We have moved since 1970. We have moved from radicals on the left to radicals on the right. The last remnants of the SDS, the Weathermen, blew themselves up making bombs. It was anticlimactic. Violence had become an end in itself. In their effort to extricate themselves from an oppressive social order, they had, in a deliberately practiced way, dulled the "inhibitions" the society had "forced upon them." They had blown up their humanity much earlier. The explosion was only an exclamation point.

One of the results of May 4 was the establishment of "the Experimental College" within the Honors College of Kent State University, a college in which I now teach. It was an attempt to legitimize and baptize the "free university" movement that had been so much a part of the protest on college campuses. Courses for credit were taught on "Racism and Poverty," "War and Peace," and, later, "Women's Issues" by townspeople, faculty, campus clergy, and students. I now teach the one remnant course from those times, "The Art of Living with Dying."

One of the questions on the final examination in that course asks the students to attack or defend the statement, "The students who died here on May 4, 1970, were martyrs." Many attack, on the grounds that the students did not expect the response or that they were simply at the wrong place at the wrong time. They do not receive as much credit for this answer as the student who wrote that two of the four were indeed martyrs, since they died in the midst of a cause for which they were spokespersons. By a Christian definition of martyr, which begins with "witness," that student is correct.

A small marker with the names of the four who died, Allison Krause, Jeffry Miller, Sandy Scheuer, and William Schroeder, two of whom were on their way to a noon class, was erected near the site. There is some terrible irony for me in the fact that three of the four were Jewish. Statistically, three of the four might just as well have been Lutheran, since there are about an equal number of each group in the university. But if they had been Lutheran, it would be easier to write it off to coincidence. The fact that they were Jews rings other bells. One wants to ask if there is something else going on, if this is to be another of those history lessons at

the expense of that people through whose fortunes and misfortunes God has taught us so much.

During the late '70s and early '80s there was agitation for a more fitting memorial. A striking sculpture was proposed, Abraham about to sacrifice Isaac. It was probably the one which ought to have been placed. But it was much too much to the point, much too controversial. Subsequently, there was one of those terrible miscalculations that exacerbate any situation. In the contest to choose a design, the winning entry was found much too belatedly to be in violation of one of the contest rules. More controversy ensued. Finally, the second place winner, Bruno Ast, was commissioned to produce his work. When sufficient funds were not forthcoming, he scaled back his design to the one visitors find now at the commons edge of the site where the shootings took place. It was dedicated on a miserable May 4 of 1990 in a chilly rainstorm. George McGovern made one of the best speeches I ever heard him give. If the weather conditions of 1990 had prevailed in 1970, there may have been no reason for the memorial. I heard an activist at Michigan State once say that it is hard to sustain a revolution in bad weather! Last spring, a good one for bulbs in northern Ohio, a sea of yellow led up to the memorial. Fifty-eight thousand daffodils were planted a few years ago, one for each of our people killed in the Vietnam debacle.

Now it is 25 years "since then." The campus is calm. The University has regained and surpassed its earlier student-body size, after having declined seriously after the May 4 event. The administration worries about the things administrations everywhere are worrying about, how to pay for today and tomorrow, what "higher education" may have come to mean. We made a significant effort last spring to do what the words on the memorial suggest. Inquire. Learn. Reflect. But some of the most difficult of all of the parties to interest in the commemoration of May 4, 25 years later, are the students. Those who once listened to the likes of Abby Hoffman now tune in regularly to Rush Limbaugh. Conversations among the students with whom I work sound like the expressions of anti-Roosevelt Republicans during World War II. It is a different world.

Other students simply tune out, perhaps for understandable reasons. I heard a professor once say to a group of youngsters that if someone were constantly reminding him of all the insurmountable problems on the horizon and the consequent impossibility of dealing with any one of them, he would tune out too. He went on to tell how he had made a difference, and it was impressive. But for the most part, students are benumbed by the prospect of trying to make a difference; they tune out because they see little hope other than in getting theirs now, walling themselves off from others, and enjoying it.

In a recent publication, a professor of English at Kent wrote:

> The shootings on May 4, 1970, severely tested and tempered, like a refiner's fire, the University's character, its capacity not just to endure but to prevail. Those thirteen seconds of rifle fire exacted not only an awful price from a handful of students and their families; they also thrust Kent into a grave national crisis and made it a battleground across which the contending forces in the cultural and political revolution that started in the sixties marched and countermarched for

> ten more years. I believe no other American university has ever been subject to such tremendous internal and external pressures applied over so long a time.*

But have we grown? Inquire of the thing. What did "Kent State" do for the country? Reflect on the reality that not much happens without sacrifice. Learn what Christians learn from *the* crisis of all history.

For crisis has to do not only with a site on a hill in Kent, it has to do with a cross on a hill outside Jerusalem. That crisis and the perspective on history and on forgiveness that it provides gives us the best way—and the only way I understand—to deal with the local or even national crisis that was Kent State. If I see the effects for good and for ill of that local crisis on the folks at Kent, I am also privileged to see the effect of that great crisis on the ability of folks convicted by its centrality in history to deal with our local situation and come out victors with the Victor. Wounds are healed. Folks blinded by rage regain their sight. The timid are strengthened. Young and old now converse with each other. God's power is made perfect in weakness. ⊕

*William Hildebrand, in *A Book of Memories, Kent State University, 1910-1992*, ed. William H. Hildebrand, Dean H. Keller, and Anita D. Herrington (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1993) 304.